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The CIA: Isolationists Have It Wrong

By John Horton*This is the second of two articles.*

HOLLYWOOD, Maryland — Some purists at the CIA disliked the agency's involvement in the war in Southeast Asia. They saw that as another diversion from essential work. No wonder there isn't better coverage of the Soviet Union, they would say. If there was an intelligence job needed in Vietnam, let the army do it.

But the decisions are not always made by the professionals. Presidents get testy at what seem to be parochial concerns. They want the job done by those best able to do it.

To even more extreme purists, any CIA relation with another government is harmful to the integrity of the CIA's work. Such CIA officers may look down on colleagues who work in liaison with another government. People in liaison are a lesser breed, lacking the aggressive, hard-charging talents needed in the CIA's own work. Thus speaks the unilateral faction. The CIA people working in liaison are scornfully accused of taking on the coloration of the foreign service they deal with, of forgetting whom they work for.

This isolationist sentiment probably hangs on even with a new generation of intelligence officers. If so, it is too bad. There are immense benefits to being in touch with other intelligence services.

Some professionals argue that information of most importance to the United States has often come from other intelligence services. Such notions, probably too subjective to prove or disprove, enrage the purist even if he does grudgingly admit that maybe here or there is another decent intelligence service.

A common question, that: Who

has the best service? Some say the Israelis, some the British, some the Soviets. The question is entertaining but there is no pat answer. Mind, there are not many top-notch services. A common appurtenance of prestige is a national airline. As expensive as it is, keeping it flying is easier than maintaining a good intelligence service.

Like a university, at any one time an intelligence service has some good departments and some weak ones. The faculties differ in morale and competence. So the question should be: Is the intelligence service serious? Does it represent its own country's interests? What is the advantage in dealing with it?

The CIA's discreet channels are used for other purposes than relaying information from another intelligence service — and strange ones, sometimes. For instance, in the 1970s more than one CIA officer in country X was startled by a message through CIA channels telling him personally to deliver a message to the chief of state without letting the ambassador know.

The invisible government? Not at all. A high White House official wanted to cut the State Department out of the diplomatic picture. The motive, as often as not, was a simple love of deviousness. The CIA officer had to gulp and do it.

Sometimes it was the other way around. A government might dislike an ambassador and want to deal through the CIA. If this became a habit, it would bring on

grand delusions for the CIA officer concerned and grudges among State Department colleagues, vented later on quite innocent CIA officers. But a U.S. ambassador might also find the CIA convenient. In more than one country with a leaky foreign office, ambassadors used CIA channels to get an important message to the chief of state.

The media are naturally drawn to the unconcealable paramilitary work — to the debate in Congress about Nicaragua — rather than to what is less visible. CIA relations with other governments are a channel for discreetly carrying out the more sensitive government tasks. The president of the United States is planning to visit country X: What's security like? Who does the Secret Service deal with to assure his protection? The drug campaign in country X is going poorly: Which officials are corrupt? What might be done about it? Official Z, a member of country X's United Nations delegation in New York, is working for the KGB. Who should be told? What will they do about it?

People who don't like the CIA should be pleased, anyway, to know that it is hard on purists, too. The CIA is well plugged in around the world. Presidents may come into office mistrusting the CIA. Some misuse it, others use it wisely. But all of the presidents since World War II have found it handy.

The writer was a CIA operations officer from 1948 to 1975, and was the intelligence officer for Latin America on the National Intelligence Council in 1983 and 1984. He contributed this comment to the Los Angeles Times.